

Polling sites off-limits to many disabled

Most Onondaga County sites have barriers to voters with disabilities, survey shows.

By Jim Read
Staff writer

Mark Barkley couldn't even get to the door of the polling place at the Manlius Fire Station on Pompey Center Road. He uses a wheelchair.

Barkley, a disability rights advocate for Arise, and 20 other volunteers from Arise and the Syracuse University's Center on Human Policy, Law and Disability Studies tested polling places around Onondaga County on Tuesday to see if they were accessible to voters with disabilities. Preliminary results from 70 polling places showed more than half have inadequate parking.

"It's something we feel is at the heart of the issue," Barkley said. "We won't be able to vote for the candidate of our choice."

At the Manlius Fire Station, there was no handicapped parking, which would guarantee Barkley the use of the wheelchair lift on his van. And there was no ramp to the door of the fire station, so Barkley was unable to test the entry doors to see if he could get inside. These barriers "lead to the disenfranchisement of people," he said.

The Manlius station was identified two years ago as a problem for voters with disabilities, said Arlene Kanter, a professor at SU's College of Law and co-director of the center on human policy. Town officials were contacted about the problems, she said.

"They assured us two years ago they'd take care of it," she said.

Town Clerk Terry Sloan said the solution worked out with Arise staff was to place a wireless doorbell by the curb with a sign. Ringing the bell would

bring assistance from poll workers, Sloan said.

"That's what Arise told us to do, and it has worked well the past couple of years," she said.

The bell wasn't in use Tuesday because poll workers told Sloan they would have the bay doors open because it was such a nice day. Those doors were not open when Arise came for its test about 3 p.m.

The volunteers held a news conference in Manlius, but it wasn't the only polling place with access problems, said Beata Karpinska-Prehn, director of advocacy for Arise.

Preliminary results showed:

■ 44 percent of the polling places checked had an inadequate entrance.

■ 34 percent lacked directional signage.

■ 98.5 percent lacked Braille and large-print instructions.

■ All lacked audiotapes of the ballot in the voting booths.

■ 57 percent of the polling places had inadequate or non-existent accessible parking.

Michael Schwartz, assistant professor of law at SU and director of the school's public interest law firm, said some polling places offered to assist those with disabilities. But when election workers were asked, they didn't know what to do. "They had no idea," he said.

The survey results will be sent to the Onondaga County Board of Elections, Karpinska-Prehn said. "They did collaborate with us and they are looking forward to it," she said.

Republican Elections Commissioner Helen Kiggins said the board doesn't have the staff to do such a survey. "We asked them to do this for us," she said.

The county takes over responsibility for elections next year from the towns and villages. The board will make changes to make polling places accessible in the future, she said.